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Myth 6: Cosmetic Use of Multiple Selection Criteria

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Twenty-five years ago, armed with the courage of my convictions and a respectable collection of empirical evidence, I articulated what I considered to be a compelling argument against the cosmetic use of multiple selection criteria as a guiding principle for identifying children and youth with high potential. To assess the current status of this myth, I enthusiastically embarked on a review of the past quarter century of research, pertinent standards established by the field's key professional organizations, state statutes and policies, and a national sampling (albeit decidedly nonrandom) of district-level documents I uncovered through Web-based sleuthing. My conclusion is summed up in the aphorism "the more things change, the more they remain the same."

Why Espouse Multiple Selection Criteria in the First Place?

Implicit in the research and subsequent policies spanning the decades are several themes: High potential for intellectual performance is multidimensional; therefore, multidimensional measures are needed to access it accurately. Multiple criteria are more sensitive to changes in development and expertise. Measurement theory adds that more information is more accurate than less information. Relying on a single assessment for placement decisions enhances the likelihood of false negative judgments. Thus, measurements of a variety of potential dimensions will increase the effectiveness of any identification plan.

Contextualizing these assertions, programs supported through the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act of 1988 (U.S. Congress, 1988) focus on children and youth whose potential is not easily documented through the use of so-called traditional measures such as individual intelligence

tests. Nearly two decades of research projects commissioned by the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, funded by the Javits Act, focus on developing and evaluating multiple criteria processes tailored to reduce underidentification of high-potential youngsters by socioeconomic status, ethnicity/race, English language proficiency, or the combined effects of giftedness with other disabling conditions.

High potential as a multidimensional attribute, requiring multiple selection criteria, is evidenced in the National Association for Gifted Children's (NAGC) guiding identification principles and standards. The principles include using instruments that "measure diverse abilities, talents, strengths, and needs in order to provide students an opportunity to demonstrate any strengths." These principles are articulated in a series of standards. A germane example is abstracted from exemplary Standard 4.0: "Student assessment data should come from multiple sources and include multiple assessment methods" (NAGC, 2009). Despite these and other attempts to promote the use of multiple criteria to identify high potential, in its summary statement on states' policies NAGC decries the lack of funding, teacher preparation, coordination, and consistency within and between states to ensure excellence and equity in identifying and programming for gifted and talented students (NAGC, 2009). With few exceptions, it seems that the field's empirically supported advances over the past quarter century are not reflected in current policy or practice.

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What Happened in the Translation From Research to Policy and Practice?

The disconnect between research-recommended practices and supporting policies is not apparent. For example, in the update of their study of state definitions, Stephens and Karnes (2000) found that most states employed a multidimensional definition of giftedness. In their detailed review of specific aspects of the states' definitions, they note,

Almost all states make some mention of superior intellect as a characteristic of giftedness. Specific academic ability is recognized by 33 states, creative ability by 30, the visual and performing arts by 20, skills in leadership by 18, and psychomotor ability by 3. Demonstrated or potential achievement is also highly recognized among the states (p. 238).

Their analysis, echoed in the most current *State of the States* summary on the NAGC Web site, confirms that overall the definitions of giftedness employed in state-level policies continue this trend toward multidimensionality (NAGC, 2009). Unfortunately, as Johnsen (1997) points out, definitions do not inherently guide assessments.

Over the past two decades, research has focused on pinpointing the causes of the gap between definition and assessment as well as proposing and field testing more congruent alternatives (e.g., Abeel, Callahan, & Hunsacker, 1994; Brown et al., 2005; Callahan, 1993; Callahan et al., 1995). For example, a comprehensive analysis of the uses of published instruments in the identification process revealed an overreliance on general intellectual aptitude measures, confusion between tests designed to assess general intellectual or specific academic aptitude, and misapplication of tests such as using intelligence tests to assess creativity or artistic ability (Abeel et al., 1994; Callahan et al., 1995). A recent national survey focusing on assumptions underlying the identification process reveals educators *espousing* an expanded view of giftedness and accompanying multiple criteria for identification but *using* restricted processes and measures (Brown et al., 2005). Drawing from state reports on identification procedures, they point to restrictive policies mandating the use of particular tests, norms, and/or cutoff scores as a key culprit.

Why Does the Myth Persist?

There are two categories of factors that support this myth's longevity: issues within the field of gifted

studies and forces surrounding the field. Issues within the field include the following: no unified theory of giftedness/talent in young people, disagreements within the field about who is being identified and for what purpose(s), inaccurate assumptions about identification, and difficulty in assessing the value of different identification processes. For example, there still exist profound disagreements about conceptualizing giftedness as "g" or general aptitude and whether intelligence tests are the most appropriate measure of potential (Renzulli & Purcell, 1996). Several authors have highlighted the effects of educators assuming that they *already know who the gifted children are*. Not only are educators thus operating on their implicit assumptions about giftedness and accompanying biases but the validity of the whole identification process is also undermined. Thus, collecting multiple types of information becomes an exercise rather than authentic problem solving. This causes dissonance and resentment. Why waste valuable time collecting data that are not considered? Why use multiple criteria when in practice they are multiple hurdles? Unfortunately, these issues are also long term and apparently durable.

Perhaps an insight comes from a fresh examination of the forces surrounding the field. In *Toward a Theory of Anti-Oppressive Education*, Kumashiro (2000) applies critical theory to understanding and changing school structures to reduce marginalization of minority groups. Evaluated from this perspective, identifying and programming for gifted students would be "Education for the Other." There is an unstated belief that if only these individuals were not present, schools would be "normal." What would it take to change policy so that identifying and educating for (multiple forms of) high potential was at the core of the education enterprise?

Last, in *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell (2002) examines the factors that precipitate social change, from Paul Revere rallying the colonists to the 1980s' reduction of crime in New York City. It occurred to me that our field has not experienced that critical mass of factors that will "tip" educators' and policy makers' opinions and support for giftedness generally and for multiple forms of giftedness in particular. If there could be some consensus about using multiple criteria to uncover more types of talent in more students, I believe we could start an "epidemic." This will require systematic and coordinated efforts as well as thinking differently about change.

If you come to a fork in the road, take it.

—Yogi Berra

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